

## Working with fathers across the Child & Family Sector – Research and Practice

What did we learn from the latest research and practice in working with fathers? This was the key question Steve Hunt, Family Services Team Leader, Anas Elwakil, Senior Family Services Practitioner, Colin Scott, Family Services Practitioner, Nilesh Gaikwad, Family Services Practitioner and myself, Mike Kelly, social worker, and writer, asked when we met to discuss our learning from the **Australian Fatherhood Research Symposium**, held in May 2023 at Deakin Downtown Melbourne.

First, we reflected on our own work with fathers across the Child and Family Services sector.

A father engagement focus team is part of the Uniting Southern Melbourne Family Services programme, which is an innovative programme that works with a diverse range of fathers who are primarily the primary carers for their children. Fathers with complex issues are included in the programme, and all are referred through the Orange Door entry point.



The 'Being Dad' group is a component of Uniting's parenting and skill development programme, which is facilitated by father engagement focus workers. The six-week course covers topics like 'being a man,' 'parenting,' 'child development,' and cultivating 'respectful relationships.'

The work of the Family Services, Father Engagement Focus Team (The Team) includes assisting fathers with custody of their children, providing individual support, developing parenting skills, and providing secondary consultations. The program's development reflects an increase in fathers who are primary carers for their children in Southern Melbourne, as well as an increase in the number of young families and higher proportions (than in metro Melbourne) of fathers from various CALD backgrounds, particularly from India, Sri Lanka, and Afghanistan, as well as a growing Chinese, Cambodian, and Vietnamese population.

The Team's hopes for what might be learnt from the Symposium were closely related to the challenges of engaging with fathers within the Child, Youth and Family sector. The Team's work with fathers takes place within the wider Australian culture, where the role of men as fathers is rapidly changing, with dads taking on more active and caring roles at all stages of child and adolescent development.

Important developments with 'father inclusive practice' are happening within the health and primary services sector. This is reflected in the array of Symposium presentations addressing the engagement of fathers with health services and family, particularly during the critical perinatal stage of a child's life. Notably, the activities of the Team, while inclusive of mental and physical health needs, encompasses the wider social needs of vulnerable families, working with fathers across all the stages of child and adolescent development.

The Team's work is underpinned by the research showing that involved fathers have positive benefits for children's cognitive and emotional development, as well as decreasing negative

child development outcomes. 'Children are better off when their relationship with their father is secure, supportive, reciprocal, sensitive, close, nurturing and warm' (Allen & Daly, 2007). The Team works with fathers through 'respectful engagement' whilst holding a 'primary focus on the safety of women and children'.

Team members were keen to learn as much as possible from the latest research on fathers from health and primary care research and practice. This openness to connecting and sharing with other disciplines, is related to the broad nature of the Team's work, which entails collaborating with a diverse range of services including mental health, disability, social security, corrections, homelessness, family violence and child protection, to name a few.

As a social worker who has managed child protection services, family services, youth justice, mental health, and community health programs for Government and not for profit agencies, I was also very aware of synergies and shared learning opportunities across health and family services systems. We all approached the Australian Fatherhood Research Symposium with the question, 'What can we learn that is going to assist our work with fathers?'

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## Key messages - Keynote speakers

### Sharing the voices of First Nations fathers – *Thomas Mayo and Professor Natasha Cabrera*

Our keynote speakers provided insights and inspiration about working with fathers with First Nations and CALD backgrounds. Thomas spoke about sharing the voices of First Nations fathers and spoke as a Torres Strait Islander whose people are the Kalkagal Nation, a father of five, and a national advocate for The Voice and Uluru Statement from the Heart. Thomas highlighted the lessons he had learnt as a union official and Indigenous advocate – unity, solidarity, being strategic, working together, the importance of structure, setting priorities, resourcing, and giving people a voice – all lessons relevant to our endeavours to promote positive and inclusive fathering.

His recent book 'Dear Son' is a collection of letters from twelve Indigenous men to their sons and a letter from Thomas to his own father.

*'It's a way to share the importance of fatherhood' and 'celebrate indigenous manhood' he said.*



The Team was impressed by Thomas's explanation that his book was an 'act of defiance' against the way Indigenous men as husbands and fathers are stereotyped.

'Dear Son' is about the lessons Indigenous men and fathers pass onto their children, concerning 'life and love, culture and pride, sexuality and race.' 'I think that an important way to guide our children is to share our mistakes and our vulnerabilities,' Thomas explained. Thomas' own letter to his father, which he read, is a proud testament to the

impact of a father's love for his son, and a father's legacy of skills, values, discipline, and pride of culture.

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**What does culture have to do with it? Understanding diversity among fathers and its implications for children's wellbeing – Professor Natasha Cabrera, University of Maryland.**

Natasha asked **'What's culture got to do with it?'**, speaking about the transformation happening across the USA, with strong data showing fathers' engagement in children's day-to-day care, literacy and 'just spending more time' with kids.



She spoke about evidence showing fathers' 'unique' influence on how children develop. However, US policy and programs (as in Australia) have not kept pace with fathers changing roles, 'We still don't think of fathers as parents, because if we were treating them as parents, they would be central to any program and any intervention that includes parents' she said.

Natasha presented data on African American and Latino fathers that challenged cultural stereotypes, identifying changing roles and attitudes that are not being valued at the policy level. This resonated with the Team who commented that indiscriminate labelling and 'totalizing views of men' leads to deficit approaches, rather than building on the strengths of fathers and cultural communities.

Natasha emphasised that fathers in cultural and ethnic groups are not homogeneous and 'ignoring variability obscures crucial differences within groups, and between cultural groups.' Natasha's key message was.

*'We need community-based programs that collaborate with community leaders to develop interventions that are culturally sensitive,' 'build on the strengths of fathers and families' and are tailored to the specific needs and values of different communities.'*

And 'support and value that fathers do parenting differently.'

**Learning from Research Presentations**

There were over thirty short research presentations over the two-day Australian Fatherhood Research Symposium. A sample of presentations, with their messages and learning for working with fathers in the child, youth, and family sector, is highlighted here.

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## **Talking to Dads, 'getting the language right' - Alison Peipers, Plus Paternal Project, Healthy Male**

Presenters commented on how best to communicate with dads, as part of 'father inclusive practice.' This research project is underpinned by theories that apply right across health and family services including family systems theory, attachment theory, and gendered stereotyping, and embraces 'whole of family' approaches' being developed across the child, youth, and family sector.



The Project's recommendations for workers promote gender equality, encourage teamwork, and show how to challenge gender stereotypes in a positive way. The [Plus Paternal: Talking to Dads Healthy Male](#) website has guides to engaging with dads as well as a wealth of information about resources for workers and fathers through the Plus Paternal Network.

This presentation about communication resonated with the 'straight talking' approach of the Team with fathers. The Team's protocols emphasise that 'the language we use when talking to fathers must be relevant, honest, direct, clear and concise – and avoid jargon.'

Our thought was that the Plus Paternal Project's research is a great lead into the sort of information that could be adapted to the challenges of engaging fathers in various parts of the family services, child protection, homelessness, and out of home care system and tailored to ethnic cultures.

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## **From Pain to Perception: Negative Parenting Experiences in Childhood and their impact on Beliefs about the Father's Role - Amy Hofmeier, University of Wollongong**

Amy's work reinforced just how generational and enduring the impact of fathering is. The study was based on an on-line survey of seventy-six adults aged 18 to 58 years and found that parental neglect and abuse was negatively related to beliefs about a father's role as a caregiver. It also found that negative parenting in childhood was related to current depression, anxiety, and stress.

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## **Dads and deployment: Rebuilding father-child relationships after military separations - Alixandra Risi, the University of Wollongong**

Alixandra presented a case study on rebuilding father-child relationships after military separations. Military fathers often experience repeated separations from their children and are faced with rebuilding relationships.



A father, his spouse and four-year-old son took part in a coaching and parent emotional support program (CaPES) which had clear benefits to the child's behaviour and wellbeing along with positive outcomes for both parents. The Team identified aspects of this approach that could be transferable to reuniting fathers separated from children, for instance in child protection cases.

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**“Google is my best friend”: Culturally and Linguistically diverse fathers’ experiences of accessing and receiving support in the perinatal period - *Rakime Elmir, Western Sydney University***

Rakime explored access and support provided to fathers with a CALD background, during the perinatal period. Fourteen fathers participated in her study which found that support to fathers in the post-natal period was either non-existent, unavailable, or not accessible. Fathers reported that ‘Google was their best friend’ in getting sought-after information, and many preferred to get information they could ‘hold and read.’ The Team raised the issue that the father’s ability to seek support can be influenced by religion and other cultural considerations and strongly supported the finding that programs need to be co-designed and developed with CALD fathers.

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**‘A big personal ambition is to be a good father’: Fathers’ accounts of their attachment parenting practices - *Levita D’Souza, Monash University***

Levita interviewed eleven fathers, with infants and children up to five years old. Fathers reported that bonding with their children and wanting to be ‘a good dad’ seemed natural to them and hoped this would lead to trust with their kids in the years ahead. The demands of paid work were a key barrier to fathers engaging more with their children, along with negative social norms about fathers who are heavily involved with their family. Levita’s finding that positive modelling by other fathers can make all the difference, was also the experience of Team members. The Team noted that finding ‘what research is missing’ can be very helpful, particularly in a sector where it is crucial to know ‘what works’ with fathers.

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**Associations between self-efficacy and health literacy among expectant and new fathers: findings from a global survey - *Karen Wynter, Monash University***

Karen presented a review of the literature on **“Interventions with fathers to prevent and reduce partner violence against women during pregnancy and early parenthood”**. The aim of this study was to discover ‘what works’ by searching six research literature data bases. While the search found over 11,000 records, surprisingly, very few studies reported on father inclusive interventions and even fewer were of an adequate quality.



This presentation left us thinking that research on intervention with fathers is sorely lacking and knowing what interventions work with fathers could make all the difference to the outcomes for families and the lives of children. This research also says a lot about the difficulties in recruiting and engaging men in studies and the challenges in evaluating ‘father focused’ programs.

Beyond this review, we discussed areas where research on fathers is scarce, including research with indigenous dads, fathers in their teens, fathers of young people who are homeless, fathers and child protection and youth justice services, and fathers grappling with ‘the shock’ and challenges of transitioning to a new country.

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### Resources and services for fathers and workers

The Australian Fatherhood Research Symposium drew our attention to the increasing number and range of resources available for family workers and fathers themselves. These on-line and other resources include:



- [SMS4 dads](#) providing helpful advice and tips in parenting,
- [SMS4 ‘Deadly Dads’](#) designed specifically to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island dads,
- [DADS Group DG](#), opportunities for simple catchups for dads with over fifty groups operating across Melbourne and Victoria
- [The Fathering Project](#) providing school-based groups, supports and resources for dads across Victoria.
- [Plus Paternal Healthy Male](#)

The Team also drew attention to mainstream local programs like [City of Casey’s Dads Matter Program](#), offering a variety of activities for dads and father figures whose children are aged from 0-6 years.

## Key questions



The Australian Fatherhood Research Symposium and our follow up discussion raised several important questions for 'father focused' teams and for family service workers pursuing quality work with fathers.

- Where do practitioners obtain the best local and global research on working with fathers across health, family, and community services?
- What are the best sources of research for working with fathers within child protection and family services, where the issues of engagement, support, responsibility, safety, and accountability can be particularly complex and challenging?
- Who is active in bridging the gap between academic research and professional practice with fathers, translating research finding into practice models and approaches, and identifying key areas of research with practitioners?
- Where are the best sources of policy, program, and practice guidelines about working with fathers generally and specifically on working with fathers in a child and family services and child protection services context?
- Where are the best sources of training and development in working with fathers, where issues of risk assessment, safety, separation, custody, mental health, responsibility, accountability, aboriginality, CALD and diversity are considerations that are foremost in the minds of practitioners?
- What avenues exist within the family services system for professionals working with fathers to network and share their practice and experience?

## Summing up

Our conversation highlighted areas where research and practice may be adapted and tailored to working with diverse cultural and socio-economic groups, and importantly, building on community and the individual strengths of fathers. We discussed the need for more research with fathers across the wider family services system including child protection and a need for research on fathers' impact on child welfare across the whole 0-17 age spectrum of pregnancy, infancy, early childhood, primary school years including the challenging years of adolescence. We concluded that there was much to learn through the

research taking place within the health and primary care sector. And more opportunities are needed to extend 'father inclusive research and practice' within the child, youth, and family sector.

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### **Reach Out**

Please get in touch with Dr Mandy Charman, Senior Manager at OPEN at the Centre of Excellence Child and Family Welfare ([Mandy.Charman@cfecfw.asn.au](mailto:Mandy.Charman@cfecfw.asn.au)), to express your interest in Father inclusive research, practice, and networking opportunities.

For further information about Uniting Family Services', Father Engagement Focus Team please contact Steve Hunt, Team Leader, as above.

Mike Kelly is also happy to share his knowledge of Victorian 'father focussed' projects with you and is keen to find out about new initiatives. Please contact Mike as above or on LinkedIn.

Information about the Australian Fatherhood Research Symposium and related fatherhood research is also available through the Australian Fatherhood Research Consortium and the Consortium Google Group <http://mappresearch.org/fatherhood-consortium>